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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: TURKISH TRUCKERS' STRIKE OVER; FUEL DELIVERIES TO NORTHERN IRAQ RESUME

1. (SBU) Truckers delivering refined products to northern Iraq under the contract managed by Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR) went on strike Monday, bringing badly need fuel deliveries to a halt and raising concerns of imminent fuel shortages. After two days of negotiations, the truckers agreed to resume deliveries. Loading began at 10 pm Wednesday evening, with the first trucks expected to reach the Iraqi border by midnite Thursday.

2. (SBU) Discontent has been rising among the truckers, who complain of growing delays at the border, mistreatment by customs officials, and growing security risks in Iraq. But the final straw was a move to end a common smuggling practice allegedly condoned by Iraqi customs officials, who allowed the truckers to bring cheap fuel back into Turkey, where it was sold at a higher price. The decision coincided with the Turkish Bayram holiday, when many truckers took time off and had the opportunity to discuss their grievances and organize a strike, which began Monday afternoon.

3. (SBU) The strike was very effective, almost completely halting deliveries. (KBR employs as many as 3,500 trucks; only about 100 trucks continued to make deliveries on Tuesday and Wednesday.) The striking drivers congregated at the main loading terminals in Mersin, where talks with the Turkish companies responsible for hiring the truckers took place. On Thursday evening, the truckers agreed to a sizable increase in the fee paid for delivery. A key point in persuading the truckers to return to work was the assurance of the 101st Airborne to provide security for the truckers in Iraq. Loading began at 10 pm Wednesday evening, and by 5 pm, 1,000 trucks were loaded and on their way to Iraq.

4. (SBU) The immediate crisis has been resolved, but KBR's representative warned that truckers will still face problems at the border and security concerns in Iraq. He remarked that truckers have demonstrated their ability to organize an effective strike and warned that repeated delays at the border, which have plagued the KBR operation, could set off a new strike at any time.

EDELMAN